

University of Dundee

## The city is critical project

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*Published in:*

arq: Architectural Research Quarterly

*DOI:*

[10.1017/S135913551900023X](https://doi.org/10.1017/S135913551900023X)

*Publication date:*

2019

*Document Version*

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication in Discovery Research Portal](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Holm, L., & Mcewan, C. (2019). The city is critical project: A poetics of collective life. *arq: Architectural Research Quarterly*, 23(2), 179-194. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S135913551900023X>

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# the city is critical project – a poetics of collective life

## **Abstract**

To find out what society looks like, look at cities. This paper sketches architectural thinking on individual/collective social formations alongside what we regard to be the architectural canon of cities.

## **Keywords**

canonic cities, politics, death drive, civilisation, architecture, reading, critical project, collective consciousness

## **Word count**

6763

## Web Abstract

What does society look like?

Teaching may not be the only way to change built environment thinking but it is one way. Vittorio Gregotti reckoned that the schools were best placed to challenge establishment practices with avant-garde thought.<sup>1</sup>

If you want to know what society looks like, look at our cities, look at their distribution of spaces, their scales, their densities, their flows of people, money, ideas. We use architecture to think the relation between the individual and the collective, and thereby to make a space for politics and public life. This paper sketches the basis for architectural thinking on individual/collective social formations in parallel with city projects by the rooms+cities architecture design research unit – itself a collective endeavor – which begin with the close reading of canonic city plans. These plans constitute the collective intelligence of architecture.

The projective vision of architecture is always to place the individual within the infrastructural field of social, political, economic, ideological, and technological forces that define the age (Mies called it *zeitgeist*). In a world where our two most precious human resources – green land and the political realm – are everywhere under threat by squanderous development practices that favour junkspace typologies and an overly instrumentalised reason that rarely recognises other value in the public realm than monetary value, architecture has the capacity to imagine new forms of city and social life (*social housing is not dead, it is not maintained*), and new relations of cities to the land.

This paper argues that architecture's task is to save the world by reforming social relations. It would be a mistake to think that architecture can directly determine social relations – nothing is so instrumental – but this paper sets out the terms of the debate and a way to think through the urgencies.

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<sup>1</sup>Vittorio Gregotti, *New Directions in Italian Architecture*. trans. Giuseppina Salvadori (London and New York: Studio Vista Limited and George Braziller, 1968).

## Introduction

If you want to know what society looks like, look at our cities, look at their distribution of spaces, their scales, their densities. Look at how cities curate events. We use architecture to think the relation between the individual and the collective, and thereby to make a space for politics and public life. This paper sketches the basis for architectural thinking on individual/collective social formations as read through the texts of Vitruvius and Freud with support from Aristotle, Arendt, and Lacan, in parallel with city projects by the rooms+cities studio, a masters level design research unit at the University of Dundee, which is itself a collective project, that begins with the close reading of canonic city plans in search of the collective body of knowledge that comprises the discipline and practice of architecture. This paper is thus comprised of two arguments, one predominantly textual, the other graphic, of complementary weight and importance, that run side by side and occasionally cross or mingle.

The projective vision of architecture is always to place the individual within the infrastructural field of social, political, economic, ideological, and technological forces that define the age (Mies called it *zeitgeist*). In a world where our two most precious human resources – green land and the political realm – are everywhere under threat by squanderous development practices that favour junkspace typologies and an overly instrumentalised reason that rarely recognises other value in the public realm than monetary value, architecture has the capacity to imagine new forms of city and social life (*social housing is not dead, it is not maintained*), and new relations of cities to the land.

This paper argues that architecture's task is to save the world by reforming social relations. It would be a mistake to think that architecture can directly determine social relations – nothing is so instrumental – but this paper sets out the terms of the debate and a way to think through the urgencies.

## Reading towards a collective architecture

We begin with city plans that have acquired canonic status in architectural thought, because they accumulate and concentrate architectural knowledge about cities and societies, and act as paradigms for projecting architectural thought forward. They ask new questions and open onto new futures. The canonic cities are our source of knowledge about cities and societies, crucial references, and design templates. Rossi touched something similar with his concept of the analogous city. We read the canonic city plans as analogues of each other. Some of these plans represent real cities, some are proposals; they are all critical projects.

Some plans are relatively neutral readings of existing cities, like figure ground plans of Manhattan, Paris, Barcelona. Some make particular claims within architectural discourse about existing cities, like Nolli's reading of Rome as a continuous surface, and Venturi's reading of Las Vegas as a continuous stream of information. Some plans invent new forms of city. These critical projects pose rather than solve problems for cities, and suggest new forms and organisations for responding to them. Piranesi's Campo Marzio uses a fictional antiquity to critique the classical order of cities (contiguity as infrastructure); Archizoom's No Stop City uses the supermarket to critique the impact of commodity culture on cities (inventory as infrastructure). We are particularly interested in avant-garde modern [Le Corbusier, Hilberseimer, Leonidov] and post-modern [Superstudio, Archigram, Archizoom, Ungers, Koolhaas, Snozzi] practices. The fact that these later practices are a critical response to modernism, and hence are historically situated does not limit their insights and creative power for today.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Piranesi, Campo Marzio (1962); Le Corbusier, *The Project for a City of 3 Million Inhabitants* (1922) and its application in the *Plan Voisin de Paris* (1922-30); Hilberseimer, *Hochhausstadt* (1924) which was Hilberseimer's critique of Le

The close reading of city plans is a rooms+cities design research strategy. It begins with the identification of rooms and urban artefacts, and the infrastructural fields that situate them; and ends with the generation of new cities. Rooms can be big, small, spatial, formal, territorial, cellular, inside, outside, singular, multiple, networked, accessible, inhabitable or not. Reading is a graphic process for exploring the structure and function of these plans, through montage, iterative drawing, modelling, writing and other methods.

We borrow the concept close reading from the text-based practices of philosophy. Probably the most powerful examples of close reading are Jacques Derrida's deconstructive reading of Heidegger, Hegel, Saussure; and Jacques Lacan's reading of Freud, in which he binds Freud's thinking into the history of western thought on the mind from the pre-Socratic philosophers to Aristotle, Descartes, Kant, Hegel. One philosopher reads another closely; thus philosophy moves forward by reworking its past. Reading is a form of writing. Close reading generates new readings by building thought threads between thinkers and is fundamental to establishing a discourse as opposed to a multitude of solipsists.<sup>3</sup>

For rooms+cities, reading is also generative. The generative act begins with the montage of canonic city plan fragments into existing city sites, to produce new part cities. We use existing city fabric because it comes readymade with its own social form, proper to it, with readymade densities, connectivities and disjunctions. It is like sampling. It is possible to understand all cities as close readings of each other. This idea of the city is related to Hubert Damisch idea of the transformation series [Velasquez to Picasso] and Rossi's idea of the analogous city [Vicenza to Venice].<sup>4</sup> For Rossi, all cities are analogous cities; even Manhattan is an analogous city. We should speak rather of analogical thinking, a form of thinking that links all cities to each other, rather than a category of cities. We define the analogical differently from Rossi, who introduced the idea into architectural discourse, because for him it largely took an imaginary form, an operation involving the slippage of images, and not a montage plan form. For Rossi, the locus of analogical thinking is collective memory; the remembering/forgetting of city places is bound up with the condensation and dislocation of images, and analogy defines that slippage. For Eisenman close reading is syntactical; it leads to the architecture of deconstruction, which is his spatial interpretation of Derrida's deconstructive readings of philosophers. There are thus two main forms of close reading: syntactical [Eisenman] and figural [rooms+cities]. In both cases close reading is spatial, and is transposed to architectural form-making from philosophical text-making.

## Statesmen vs consumers

We are all what Aristotle called statesmen: men and women of the state or *polis*. If the rooms+cities project has a theoretical underpinning it is the conviction, perhaps now looking simultaneously conservative and radical, that the public space of the city is the foundation of political life. If this project is against something, it is against the particularly virulent form of capitalism – the commodity form of capitalism – that addresses the individual always, and always

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Corbusier's project; Leonidov, the linear city of *Magnitogorsk* (19330); Archigram, *Plug-In City* (1964), their answer to continuous growth and sprawl within the idiom of product replacement; Superstudio, *The Continuous Monument* (1969); Archizoom, *No Stop City* (1969); O M Ungers, *et al.*, *The city in the city – Berlin: Green Archipelago* (1977); Koolhaas, Melun-Senart (1988); Snozzi, *Delta Metropolis* (2002) competition project for the area formerly known as the Randstad.

<sup>3</sup> Probably the most poignant reading of Freud is when Lacan struggles to make sense of Freud's enigmatic *Wo Es Will Soll Ich Werden* to which he returns in 5 papers, for a discussion of which, see my *Brunelleschi Lacan Le Corbusier* (Routledge 2010). For close reading in architecture, see Adam Sharr, ed., *Reading Architecture and Culture: researching buildings, spaces and documents* (London: Routledge, 2012). The scientific method does for the sciences what close reading does for the humanities, it links individuals and individual ideas into discourses.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Hubert Damisch, *The Origin of Perspective* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1994).

at the level of the death drive where the individual-ness of the individual is wont to tear apart the ties that bind us into civilisations. This subject of the commodity form, this consumer, is isolated in relation to the alluring commodity, just me and my object. It often takes the form of need (*I need the red ones*); it often takes the form of choices between indistinguishable alternatives (*I need the red ones, not the blues ones*). Not all forms of consumption are destructive. What is destructive is the particular way the commodity form of capitalism isolates us as individuals. Neoliberal approaches to public services use this template of consumer choice. Good health care, for example, is equated with having a choice of doctors, as if, when you need a doctor, we are at *the red ones or blue ones* cross road.

In 'The Right to the City' (2008), David Harvey argues that, in western democracies, the rights to private property and profit 'trump' the rights to access to the *polis*, and the public goods that this signifies. His thesis goes in the direction of economics. Forms of development create forms of subject. Suburbanisation creates worker alienated from each other in debt.<sup>5</sup> In the present context, we take this in a slightly different direction. When I am consumed by my objects, I am isolated in my relation to my object choices. I am no longer a statesman, a subject of the city, determined by its public-ness, its forms and arrangements of spaces. I am determined by, e.g., the books I read; but as a statesman, I am determined by my (private) voting record, and the relation of my flat to my neighbours, and our relation to the street, and our street to our library, tram lines, supermarket, parks, views, sunrises, darkness,.... These relations are given their typical and exemplary definition in the canonic city plans with which we begin our projects. Le Corbusier's *Contemporary City for 3 Million* and Hilbershiemer's *Hochhausstadt* were studies in the relation of the private realm of the individual flat to the public realm of the collectively held city. Archizoom's *No Stop City* is the *reductio ad absurdum* fantasy of a city as totally commodified field. Houssmann's Paris renovations clarify the confluence of state power and the public realm. The Manhattan grid articulates a clear relation between residential and commercial realms.

## Statesmen, reading towards the collective

### *Vitruvius*

'Therefore, because of the discovery of fire, there arose at the beginning, concourse among men, deliberation and a life in common. Many came together into one place,....' [p.77]<sup>6</sup>

'...then, from the construction of buildings they progressed by degrees to other crafts and disciplines, and they led the way from a savage and rustic life to a peaceful civilisation.' [p.85]

Vitruvius' account of the primitive hut in *The Ten Books on Architecture* tells the story of the birth of architecture from its pre-architectural origins. Primitive men live in the forest until driven out by a catastrophic fire. 'Men, in the old way, were born like animals in forests....' [p77] Once the fire had run its course, the forest dwellers congregate in clearings around the scattered embers. These are the first campfires, catastrophe domesticated. 'In this concourse of mankind,... they fixed words....' [p79] 'And so they generated conversation with one another.' [p79] Once gathered into groups around these originary hearths and words, they invented language so that they could speak to one another, and once speaking, decide to construct homes. Architecture is born with language and fire. Architecture is different from the rude burrowed shelters of primitives, the way language is different from the barking of animals. The trace of speech – what accompanies it as its permanent trace – is writing; and in his extraordinary narrative, Vitruvius presents construction – the construction of architecture – as the writing that accompanies

<sup>5</sup> David Harvey, 'The Right to the City' in *New Left Review*, (2008), pp. 23-40.

<sup>6</sup> All page numbers for quotes in this section are from *Vitruvius: On Architecture, books I-V* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998) transl. by Frank Granger.

concourse. In other words, for Vitruvius, language constitutes the life in common, and Vitruvius equates language with speech and architecture.

### ***Aristotle and Arendt***

‘The association that aims to embrace all other goods, the highest good and the “most sovereign” association is the state. This is the association which we call the state, the association which is “political”’ [footnote = ‘the association that takes the form of a polis’] 1252a1

There is a long line of thinking in architectural and political discourse that equates the city-state or *polis* with the site of public life and politics. This equation has its clearest contemporary statement in the political philosopher Hannah Arendt’s reading of Aristotle. The architects and theorists Pier Vittorio Aureli, George Baird, and Kenneth Frampton are largely responsible for introducing her work in architectural discourse.<sup>7</sup> Politics is about the public resolution of conflict. The agora or marketplace in Aristotle’s Athens was originally the space for commerce, intellectual thought, and political debate at a time when democracy was still a new form, perhaps still so new it was not yet recognised. They were working it out as they built it. In *The Politics*, Aristotle argued that the polis was the natural home of man the political animal. He argues that there are 4 forms of association: the breeding pair, the family, the village, and the state (a kingdom is simply a large family ruled by a despot/father). The polis, where inhabitants are statesmen who meet as equals to publicly resolve conflicts of interest, is the social condition of democracy. And the agora is its form. When Aristotle defines man as a ‘political animal’ motivated by virtue, and distinguishes this political animal from the simple animal – what the political philosopher Agamben will call bare life to distinguish it from a qualified life – he makes a similar distinction to Vitruvius between the purposive concourse of men brought together by language, and the primitive condition of the barking solipsist whose togetherness is random.<sup>8</sup>

In *The Human Condition* (1958), Arendt argues that the city is the formal paradigm for democracy. It is the locus for both what Arendt calls ‘the togetherness of people’ and the ‘space of appearance’. In the togetherness of people (Vitruvius’s *concourse* and Aristotle’s *association*) is power (*unity is strength*). The space of appearance is where we make our views public, hence the space where they can be scrutinised and debated and resolved, and where we appear accountable for them. This happens in the streets and the debating chamber, both of which appear as architectural forms in our plans of cities.<sup>9</sup>

### ***Freud***

‘The existence of this inclination to aggression,... disturbs our relations with our neighbour and... forces civilisation into such a high expenditure of energy. In consequence of this primary mutual hostility of human beings, civilised society is perpetually threatened with disintegration.’ Freud, *Civilisation and its Discontents* [49]

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<sup>7</sup> Pier Vittorio Aureli, *The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture*, (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2011); George Baird, *The Space of Appearance*, (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1995); Kenneth Frampton, ‘The status of man and the status of his objects’ in *Labour, Work and Architecture: collected essays on architecture and design*, (London: Phaidon Press, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> Aristotle, *The Politics* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1962/1982). The title translates ‘things concerning the polis’. The nub of our argument resides in pp55-60, paragraphs 1252a24 – 1253a29. According to Aristotle’s translators, Sinclair and Saunders, Aristotle was unknown to Republican Rome, so we should not expect Vitruvius to refer to him.

<sup>9</sup> Kenneth Frampton quotes Arendt in his chapters on critical regionalism [togetherness] and globalisation [space of appearance] for which see *Modern Architecture: a Critical History*. It is unclear whether concourse in social media meets the criteria for Arendt’s space of appearance. In a series of oppositions that cascade under Aristotle’s distinction between household and state, Vittorio Aureli, reading Arendt and Aristotle, distinguishes politics & economics in classical thought, the architectural form of the polis & the management of city growth, and criticises contemporary planning practice as a form of household management of the continuous process of urbanisation rather than what it should be, the formal articulation of settlements for public debate.

‘[T]he inclination to aggression is an original, self-subsisting instinctual disposition in man,... that... constitutes the greatest impediment to civilisation. ... [C]ivilisation is a process in the service of Eros, whose purpose is to combine single human individuals, and after that families, then races, peoples and nations, into one great unity, the unity of mankind.’ [p59]

The discourse on the togetherness is shadowed by another discourse that runs parallel to it but is rarely invoked in political or architectural contexts. One of the most ambitious attempts to articulate the relation of individual to collective is Freud's account of the death drive. Freud's total opus can be regarded as a reflection on human nature; it is one of the most sustained and internally indexed reflections on our nature, in modern thought.<sup>10</sup> In its ambition, it exposes the ambiguities that dog originary thinking. Freud made three significant statements about the drives (or instincts as they appear in English translations). Most of us who have encountered the drives are familiar with the dialectic between the mythic terms Eros and Thanatos, love and death, which puts the creative forces of love, life, and creation, in opposition to the forces of death and destruction. This is how the death drive is formulated in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud's second of three statements on the drive, where he argues that the opposing drives toward love and death, pleasure and pain, construction and destruction, inhabit all people.

In *Civilisation and its Discontents* (1930), Freud puts the drive in opposition to civilisation, as indeed does most of the literature emanating from *Civilisation*...<sup>11</sup>. This is Freud's final statement on the drive, and as an architectural proposition, his most definitive. He argues that our natural inclination for aggression against others will tear civilisation apart. Civilisation appears as a form of tie that binds individuals into collective social formations. Freud does not elaborate this tie but we can assume that it includes all the great social institutions, chief among them language, but we could include law, and construction, money, religion, customs, the arts, and all the institutions that regulate life. Civilisation imposes a symbolic infrastructure upon subjects that reigns in our drives, without which we would expend ourselves in a kind of objectiveless fighting and fornicating. In psychoanalytic discourse, Lacan calls this infrastructure the symbolic order or *the field of the other*. The ‘inclination to aggression’ resides in each individual and threatens to break those binds. There are passages in *Civilisation*... where Freud puts the death drive in opposition to love or Eros, rather than civilisation (a regression to *Beyond*... thinking). Eros here is not the narcissism of the individual (self-love and hence aggression to others); it is the love of others, shorthand for the social field that constitutes civilisation. We are bound to each other, mostly in unconscious ways or ways of which we are largely unaware, because they work through mechanism of language, rather than intention. In post-structural psychoanalytic discourse, the unconscious is the paradigm collective social form, and it collects under it a number of other terms that appear in the architectural and political discourses, including collective memory (Rossi, Halbwachs) and class consciousness (Marx). In the terms of Vitruvius, Eros is near to ‘concourse among men’; Eros has the form of speech and construction. And the drive, even when placed in opposition to Eros, seems to be not an other component of the social field, one social pressure among many, but something real that lies outside it, other to it.

In his first statement on the drives, ‘The Instincts and their Vicissitudes’ (1915), Freud reduces all psychical activity to the incessant repetition of a simple stimulus-response mechanism. All input

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<sup>10</sup> Psychoanalysis is rigorously evidence based. The psychoanalytic setting is a linguistic laboratory. Psychoanalysis has an uneasy relation to the sciences because the relations it builds are linguistic, not cause-and-effect. The theory of the drives is ground up theory that emerged out of countless hours of patient observation. It poses a problem for science: a rigorously empirical discipline dedicated to bringing new facts into the world, that does not follow scientific method.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Felix Guattari, the post-Lacanian analyst and half of the philosopher Deleuze+Guattari, *The Three Ecologies* (London: Athlone, 1989/2000); Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: a philosophical inquiry into Freud*; Norman O. Brown, *Life Against Death*, and Nancy Julia Chodorow, ‘Beyond Drive Theory: object relations and the limits of radical individualism’ in *Theory and Society*, 14 (1985) 271-319, which discusses these two latter texts.



to the psyche through the senses is stimulus, and the labour of the psyche is its response. The drive appears at the 'frontier between the mental and the somatic'. In a trop not unlike the emergence of architecture as discourse in Vitruvius, the drive inhabits each individual at the horizon where opaque body process emerges as representation to the psyche. This repetition is the psychical mechanism in its most originary form, the flywheel that underlies all our psychical activity, of which language is the main medium but which includes all human activities – art and science, social political and economic – that organise collective life.

In *Civilisation...*, drive theory is presented as a dialectic between the collective, which is the locus of civilisation, in all its particularity and universality, its creation and constructivity (Rossi defines *the architecture of the city* as *construction*) and the individual, which lies outside it, and is the locus of a form of deaf, dumb, and numb repetition that undoes all that is civilisation and all that it signifies. Freud calls this inclination *Trieb* or drive, to distinguish it from *Instinkt* or animal instinct. In his argument drive plays the role of what is simple and pre-significant *vis-à-vis* a civilisation that is constructed and signifying. Freud puts *civilisation* in the singular: it is a collective fiction, a fictional collective. *Discontents* is plural: reality is a multitude of individuals. A fictive unity is put in dialogue with a real multitude. As if we are all naturally individuals, the reality of the body, my body different from yours. And we share a fiction that we are a civilisation, and what civilisation is protecting us against is our own nature.<sup>12</sup>

### ***Lacan reading Freud***

Civilisation is not a fiction but it is, to borrow Lacan's term, symbolic, which distinguishes it from other sorts of fictions that are imaginary, and from the opaque material world. In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1964), Lacan argues that Freud's concept of the drive is as much a symbolic construct as is civilisation. He calls the four components (pressure, aim, object, source) by which Freud defines the drive in '...Vicissitudes' a *montage*. What links them is the compelling nature of the assemblage, and not logic or cause. Lacan argues furthermore that Freud cannot articulate the recursive 'circuit' or 'path' of the drive, in effect driven behaviour, without recourse to the linguistic forms of the active, passive, and reflexive verb forms.<sup>13</sup> Lacan takes Freud's English translators to task for translating both *Trieb* and *Instinkt* as *instinct*, thereby blurring a critical distinction in Freud's thought between what is constructed and what is the natural behaviour of animals.<sup>14</sup> According to Lacan, Freud's individual – the locus of the drive – is as much an artefact or construct of civilisation – as is civilisation. The subject of psychoanalysis, takes the form of a speaking being [Lacan's *parle-être*], an individual availing itself of a collectively held linguistic culture, and it must already be bound into civilisation, in order to articulate itself as individual.

### ***Rereading Vitruvius***

The same logic of origins that is at work in Freud's account of civilisation is at work in Vitruvius' account of architecture, and indeed in all originary thinking. In Freud, civilisation has to invent an unbound individual (*an oxymoron?*) in order to explain itself by reference to an origin. Civilisation has to expel this fictive individual in order to be civilisation; thereafter, this individual persists as a kind of absent presence that haunts civilisation. This individual is a construction, but is asked to play the role of an origin. It appears as an outsider, but turns out to be internal to the logic of

<sup>12</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Instincts and their Vicissitudes (1915)', in *Sigmund Freud: on Metapsychology: the theory of psychoanalysis*, edited by A. Richards and J. Strachey (London: Penguin, 1991), pp. 113-38; *Beyond the pleasure principle* (London: Hogarth Press and Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1920/1974); *Civilization and its Discontents*, (London: Hogarth Press and Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1930/1975). Page numbers in this section from *Civilization...*

<sup>13</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (New York: Norton Press, 1981) pp , an argument too complex for this author.

<sup>14</sup> Jacques Lacan, 'The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectics of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious (1960)', in *Écrits: the first complete edition in English*, (New York: W W Norton 2006), pp. 671-702. Most animals are by nature associative.

civilisation. The logic is spatial, but it is masked by temporal metaphors. It appears in Derrida's deconstructive reading of phenomenology as a meaning that is always already deferred, an absent presence that has haunted western philosophy since Plato. It appears in the political philosopher Giorgio Agamben's account of the origins of the concept of the law and the force of law, in the state of exception or emergency that is precisely the moment when the power of the law is revoked. It appears in one of Lacan's few short statements on architecture, *architecture, like painting, is organised around emptiness*. This individual is not the origin, but the *negated present* [Derrida's formula] of civilisation, this absent figure that civilisation has to construct at its centre and then expel, disown, negate, in order to be civilisation.<sup>15</sup>

In Vitruvius, we witness the dual emergence of the symbolic code of architecture from instinctual twig gathering and the symbolic code of language from the instinctual barking. We are bound by these codes into collective social formations without which we could not be individuals. These codes define our subjectivity; their emergence from a deaf and dumb instinctual condition mark the horizon of our subjectivity. We have seen that Freud and Lacan carefully distinguish the drive from instinct. The drive is a disintegration of these social codes into repetition, which is not the same as instinctual twig gathering, although in some cases it may look similar. Instead of symbolic distinctions, repetition of the same. In the context of desire, and object choice, which are symbolic activities that cannot be understood outside the social codes that construct desire and its choices, the drive appears as greed. Greed is the disintegration of desire into a form of repetition. Greed increases as choice decreases. Greed increases with the proliferation of choices between identical objects: 25 different toppings of pizza which are all really just pizza; cars with hundreds of interchangeable options and colours and configurations of lights and grills and vents, all of which are just midrange Mondeos. In 'Homes for America' (1967), Dan Graham reproduces the endless identical variations for the same suburban home – his critique of Levittown – each model with an anodyne and meaningless name and pastel colour. This is not Vitruvius' primitive hut updated, but its negation in a form of beguiling negation driven by commodity capitalism. It is going in the opposite direction to civilisation. Our subjectivity emerged with the emergence of Vitruvius' hut, and we witness it disappearing again in the numbing repetition of 'Homes for America'.<sup>16</sup>

The death drive is not a return to the primitive, or to the animal; nor even to the non-organic; although it may sometime look that way, and indeed, Freud sometimes seems to describe it that way. It is a break down or corruption of the symbolic order, when it no longer functions for us, or rather, when we no longer think it is functioning for us. When we no longer see its importance, meaning, or significance. It is when we forget that the overriding significance of speech is to bring us together, even when we are arguing with each other. Or the primary reason for construction is to bring us together into greater unities, even when we are building walls that separate. It is like putting Beethoven on the turntable and instead of being carried along by his music alongside other listeners to Beethoven, thinking only that it is a revolving plastic disk with a needle in a groove. We are usually only reminded of this in particular circumstances like when the needle starts skipping. This is – in a material sense – the reality of a recording, but this reality does not stop it from also functioning for us as Beethoven.

<sup>15</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Differance', in *The Margins of Philosophy*, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1982), pp. 1-27; Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press 2005); Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960* (NYC: Norton, 1992). Derrida uses a similar formula to account for how Marxist thought continues to haunt philosophical thinking, especially after the fall of the wall for which see: Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, transl. by Peggy Kamuf (Routledge 1993/1994).

<sup>16</sup> Dan Graham, 'Homes for America' in *Art in America* (January 1967). 'Homes...' was an anthropological project. A sampling of the names of the house types: the sonata, concerto, overturn, ballet, prelude, serenade, nocturne, rhapsody. A different anthropological project, but one that leads to a similarly death drive vision of American homes, is Jason Griffith and Alex Gino's *Manifest Destiny: a guide to the essential indifference of American Suburban Housing* (London: Architectural Association, 2011).

Architecture binds individuals because projects are – in Arendt’s terms – bigger than what any one person can construct and they outlast the mortality of individuals<sup>17</sup>. In Vitruvius, civilised people construct a pre-linguistic individual to exclude, in order to make concourse amongst speaking subjects intelligible. The individual cannot experience itself as an individual until it is already part of a larger linguistic entity. A civilisation styled as a social group modelled on the family, i.e. a grouping around a campfire or hearth but in reality a grouping of many families, and no longer an extension of the breeding pair, who now have language, in other words, a linguistically constituted group who have moved beyond the yelping of animals, invent a pre-social formation, the unattached wandering yelping forest-bound fire-harassed individual, in order to make intelligible to themselves their current condition of concourse. The individual is born with language and architecture; language and architecture are the infrastructures that bind individuals; the negativity they contain which threatens them from the inside, is associated with the retroactive construction of an absent presence.

There is an analogous relation between writing and architecture: Vitruvius’ *parole-être* talking around their campfire and the Vitruvian hut that we build and habit together whilst we talk. We are bound to each other by conversation and by the project, designed and constructed. Language is a form of construction that binds us together, only we tend not to recognise it as such because we live in a linguistic environment, it is our air, it is all around us, as opposed to a crafted artifact that we place before our eyes and hands. Hannah Arendt talks about the importance of work (*Victorian good works*) which put things into the world that outlast us; she distinguishes work from labour that is completely exhausted each day in survival (*the drive is labour*). She critiques Marx for flubbing this distinction.<sup>18</sup> Work produces civilisation and its enduring artifacts. Although it may seem that our speech disappears like labour, gone without remainder as soon as it does its job, and writing – writing unlike speech, leaves a trace – is a slim artifact, speech and writing put ideas into the world which are as constructional and artifactual as building. Guattari argues for an ecology that preserves non-corporeal beings like ideas as well as living beings. People congregate around ideas as much as they congregate around buildings and camp fires.

## Rooms+cities & its cities

Rooms+cities is a form of practice comprising architectural design and texts to produce projects that are critical readings of cities. We distinguish the critical practice from what we call – following Tafuri – consumer science. As if societies were consumers of cities, and architecture served it by simplistically giving it what it wants as opposed to giving it critical reflection, health and well-being, and deferred happiness. Koolhaas is a critical practice; Foster is consumer science. Sometimes, we serve society best by biting the hand that feeds us. The critical project is future facing, even if it draws on the intelligence of the past. There are other practices that produce texts with their designs, but they tend to reproduce, and hence reinforce rather than critique, the consumer *quo*.<sup>19</sup>

We understand the critical project in terms of the dialectic between room and city: the room is the locus of occupation; the city is the field within which occupation occurs. The room is the

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. Frampton quoting Arendt.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Frampton quoting Arendt.

<sup>19</sup> Lacan used to quip that the ego has a traumatic relation to the truth, and will go to any measures to shield itself from it. We refer to practices that Peter Cook calls ‘the biscuit boys’. Tafuri does not say ‘consumer science’. We cannot find this phrase in his text, and instead ‘distill’ it from a reading of Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia: design and capitalist development*, (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1976) and from Pier Vittorio Aureli, *The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture*, (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2011) which is itself a reading of Tafuri.

place of an individual; the collective is infrastructural because infrastructure allows it to happen. We define infrastructure to include the road and cabling network, all forms of communication without which collective consciousness would not be possible; we include also archives, and the continuous space-shaping surface of Rome's fabric, such as it was the principal achievement of the Nolli plan to visualise. The Nolli plan demonstrated to architecture that Rome is nothing if not an infrastructure of surface.

The rooms+cities moniker is taken from Lacan's formula for the subject of psychoanalysis: ego-unconscious. Lacan crosses Freud's two formulas or *topographies* for the psyche. Freud's first topography, ego/id, was about agency; the second, conscious/unconscious, are functions. The unconscious is not a mythic place but the collective field where we communicate our desire all the time, under the radar. We only become aware of it when there are divergences between subjects, like slips of the tongue. The conscious *I want* of the ego has a position in space and in discourse, but what I say is never precisely what you hear or what I mean. The unconscious is thus the infrastructural field where desire is articulated and always missed.

One of the demands made upon architecture by society is to articulate, by spatial and material means, this collective life and consciousness. We regard the binary individual-collective as a theoretical frame with which to understand the myriad social formations that manifest through social and political practices and institutions. In reality they define two extremes of a continuum. By constructing the city, architecture spatialises the social field and thus makes visible what might otherwise remain hidden within the function of social and political practice. Construction is the particular form of close critical reading of the city that is proper to architecture. Other practices – fiction for instance – do it too, but differently.<sup>20</sup>

We can read the relation of individual to collective in the plans of the mature industrial cities of the contemporary west, which have – during the history of industrial development and labour relations – worked out forms and organisations that are dense enough to support commerce and the *togetherness* of political life. In Manhattan, this relation of individual to collective is articulated in the two orientations and two scales of the street grid, which define residential and commercial space.<sup>21</sup> The architectural expression of these two social forms follow from the scale change between north-south avenues and east-west crosstown streets. The turn of a corner accompanied by the change in scale forms a palpable spatial threshold between residential and commercial. This is the particular way it is articulated in Manhattan, different from how the Berlin block does it, or the Paris boulevard section.<sup>22</sup> Paradoxically, the Manhattan grid is the paradigm commodity form. The 1811 Commissioners Plan divided a wooded and agrarian Manhattan into rectangular blocks, and each block into rectangular plots for sale. These plots, which define the smallest unit of building, are still visible in the fire marshal plans of Manhattan. They define the narrow deep

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<sup>20</sup> Two great novels of New York: Paul Auster, *New York Trilogy* (1985/86); John Dos Passos, *USA Trilogy* (1930/32/36). Two great novels of Paris and London: George Orwell, *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933); Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859).

<sup>21</sup> In Manhattan the commercial realm is synonymous with the public realm. There are almost no *piazas*. And most of those that there are, like Rockefeller Centre or the Seagram setback provision, are private property. When people exercise their right to congregate in protest, they do it by marching down the avenues. In *The Life and Death of American Cities*, Jane Jacobs got it critically wrong when she criticised the long block from the perspective of her Greenwich Village window. The Manhattan long block which functions in relation to the short commercial block, is one of the most effective neighbourhoods in the world.

<sup>22</sup> The residential neighbourhoods of Manhattan are defined by turn of the century residential buildings averaging between 6 and 10 stories that line the long single lane, one-way crosstown streets. The relation of individual and collective begins with a typical apartment plan. The facades of these buildings unify 10 floors of apartments into a single identity. The facades line the crosstown streets. These streets, which have the scale, leafy light, and character of neighbourhoods, frame into the broad commercial avenues (4 lane, two way) that define a continuous retail storefront.

party wall townhouse typology; the typical apartment building cobbles several plots together. Their long sides define the broad commercial fronts on the avenues.

That the relation of the individual to the collective is central to architectural discourse on cities can be seen in the great critical city projects of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. In the *City for 3 Million Inhabitants* and its subsequent worked examples like the *Plan Voisin de Paris*, one of the critical issues was to design a form of dwelling adequate to the form of the city plan. It was this relation of dwelling unit to city articulated in Le Corbusier's project that Hilberseimer criticised in his *Hochhausstadt* counter-project. It is a question of how the city collects dwellings into a purposive and identifiable relationship to each other and to the public realm, rather than – his reading of Le Corbusier – a romantic visual relation. In *The History of the City* (1980), Leonardo Benevolo argues that the exploration of new forms of housing – hence new forms of association – was the defining project of modern architecture. He called it 'social research', and it is significant that almost all the major housing projects, both real and speculative proposals, were situated within a city context where the relation of the housing to city was under scrutiny alongside problems of household accommodation and economy.

When Venturi launched his thesis about Las Vegas by putting a picture post card on the Nolli plan, he was not only adding Vegas to the city canon, he was also calling for a change in values. The lingering doubt about Venturi's thesis does not have to do with his reading of Las Vegas as information infrastructure, but the loss of a paradigm of social life. What modern architecture loves about Rome, is not the historical form and style but the street life. Venturi is replacing the value we attribute to social life – what we might call the political value of the city – with commodity value (in a word, *Learning from Las Vegas* replaces the use value of cities with exchange value). We cannot prevent the space for social life from becoming a commodity for consumption, but we can at least be cognizant of what is happening. The infrastructural surface of Rome is about creating space for the *appearance* of collective life; the information roadways of Las Vegas – and the new urbanism that is consequent on Las Vegas thinking – are about satisfying the *I want* of the individual. There is a difference between a collective unity and a multitude of individuals, and the construction of the city either brings individuals together into collective action or it isolates them in their individual wants. That Frampton understood Venturi's gesture as an attack on the political value of the city is clear from the way he castigates Venturi for saying that Americans do not need piazza because they have TV.<sup>23</sup>

### Summary by way of conclusion

The reason why this paper is classified as architecture and has an architecture design research unit behind it – as opposed to sociology – is that Vitruvius' campfire is a spatial form as well as a social form. It is the form of a group of people talking to each other. The campfire is sometimes substituted by a dining table. When we build cities, we build societies. The campfire is a social form – the form of a society organised by speech or what Vitruvius called *concourse*. Aldo van Eyck recognised it in Dogon culture. It is not primitive, but it is fundamental. It is arguably the form that underlies all societies, because all societies are organised by speech. Speech underlies all other social forms whether it be the Rotary Club, the Parent-Teacher Association or Parliament.

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<sup>23</sup> Kenneth Frampton, 'Towards a critical regionalism: 6 points for an architecture of resistance', in *Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, edited by H. Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983), p25. Frampton writes 'The manipulative bias of such ideologies [new urbanism] has never been more openly expressed than in Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1966) wherein the author asserts that Americans do not need piazzas, since they should be at home watching television. Such reactionary attitudes emphasize the impotence of an urbanised population which has paradoxically lost the object of its urbanization.' Entertainment is the opiate of the masses.

It is not primitive, but it is simple and not yet augmented by any technology except the technology of fire.<sup>24</sup>

We need to start looking more purposively at city fabric as social fabric. We need to understand the morphology of cities as a morphology of social forms. In the rooms+cities urban design research unit, we treat the canon of great cities as a typological classification of alternative social formations that we can sample, transform, and recombine in different ways, to produce new cities or part-cities. We are not claiming that living in a working class Manhattan makes an individual into a socially responsible member of a collective. But we are claiming that living in Manhattan is a step up from living in the working class aloneness of Levittown (or other out of town suburban tract developments typical of market-led volume home building based on land speculation), and that it is a step toward social action.

We are making a further and more important claim, more important in the context of a discussion about how concourse creates communities. There is a symbolic difference between Manhattan and Levittown. No city or part-city can escape the symbolic register of its forms and fabrics. When you live in the dense urban fabric of Manhattan, you make a commitment, whether willing or not, whether wittingly or not, to a certain form of living together and a certain form of public realm that living together supports. And this commitment sends a message to the rest of the world about a certain form of public and private life, regulated by its connectivities and thresholds, its scales, its adjacencies and differences, even if you do not know the full extent of that message, its full reach and significance and power.

### **Conclusion on collective consciousness and renunciation**

The challenge for architecture is to explore new forms of collective consciousness in an age of commodity capitalism. This is the urgent project of our times. What is at stake is how architecture articulates the relation between the individual and the collective. The one and the many. The multitude of ones that resist collectivisation. The many that form a unity with an intelligible grammar, a position and direction, an urgency, a form. Architecture articulates this relation spatially. Architecture is in dialogue with neighbouring practices in the arts, humanities, and social sciences. We draw our urgency from our incapacity to stop damaging ourselves by damaging our environment. Although Freud wrote his most definitive statement on civilisation at a time when the long shadow of fascism was already cast upon Vienna, if he were writing today, he might have seen this aggression against ourselves and others, in the way our development practices are damaging the environment. Commodity capitalism is capitalism's most virulent form because it reduces us to individuals in a condition of greed, which is as close to the death drive as we are likely to get. This individual (the individual of commodity greed, individual of the death drive) is not primitive, but hollowed out. It is imagined in its contemporary form in zombie movies. A multitude of hollowed out individuals, each a solitary unto-itself, lurching forward, consuming everything in its path, without pleasure or discrimination. The problem is not capitalism as a way of organising development; the problem is the commodity form (*commodity communism is no better than commodity capitalism*).<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. Aldo van Eyck, ; Le Corbusier says that there is no such thing as primitive man, only primitive technology; we take this to mean that man is always already fully formed as a speaking being, for which see Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture* (1923) p. See Gaston Bachelard, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire* (1938/1964), transl by Alan CM Ross, with an introduction by Northrop Frye, in which fire is not so much *psycho*-analysed as made to serve as the model for the shape shifting consuming *psyche*. The psyche, in post-Freudian, Lacanian analysis is an intersubjective or collective phenomenon; it is between subjects like campfires, not within them. The psyche – Vitruvian, Aristotelian, Le Corbusian, modern or otherwise – simply does not emerge in human subjects until they converse around campfires.

<sup>25</sup> In *A Grammar of the Multitude* (2004) Paolo Virno argues that even the multitude – which resides like the great unwashed antithesis of whatever fantasy figure it is that politicians think they are addressing by their politics – has a grammar, hence a form of organization. Virno shows that even organization is politicized, weaponized, because politics seeks to not recognize

We regard the public life of the city as tantamount to political life. Geddes and Mumford regarded the city as the single most important artefact of our civilisation, and its function is to give *togetherness* a determined form with a purposive and significant relation to individuals. We read this relation in our canonic city plans. Environmental damage is a failure of public life, not a failure of technology, even if technology can ameliorate it. We cannot disengage our treatment of the environment from public life. Indeed, Guattari regarded them as inseparable. This paper has attempted to interpret what collective life might be, in architectural terms. This has involved reading canonic plans as forms of collective life. And then re-inscribing these plans into new sites. We need to develop new forms of living together, with implications for forms of governance, so that we can agree an approach to development that renounces the profligate exploitation of our land and public realm.<sup>26</sup>

'The intelligence of Vitruvius' and Aristotle's parallel accounts of the formation of architecture and society is that they amplify how ambiguous our relation to nature is, an ambiguity they obscure by giving this formation the temporal form of an event. As if we have emerged from a state of nature, rather than being always already natural. The intelligence of drive theory is that it understands destruction to be internal to civilisation and not in opposition to it, an internal core that has to be contained bracketed rejected. It puts the damage we do to the public realm and to the environment onto a universal template for what it is to be human. It is human to regard community as a burden of responsibility. It is human to regard civilisation-building as arduous and difficult to sustain because it involves togetherness when what we would really rather do is what we always do, flub out in front of our screen. Alone.

It is possible to understand the spatial expression of architecture, which usually takes the form of a container, its preoccupations with the envelope, with cladding (*thank you Semper, thank you Loos*), as an allusion to the internal resistance necessary to support civilisation. We may need to clad our profligate ways by creating public forms of renouncing them (*any other form of containment is repression, and when did that work?*). It may be that the paradigm form of collective consciousness for today is a form of renunciation, and we may need to construct a city in which renunciation can *appear* as politic. Either renunciation or else we need to write new narratives of death and forgiveness, a kind of *Civilisation...* update, because if we cannot stop damaging our green and public environments, we will need to beg the forgiveness from our children for what we could not help but do. The drive is either displaced by a form of truth commission or is sublimated as narrative. In either case, it needs a space.

## Note

A version of this paper was first read at the EAUH conference, Rome, August 2018 in the paper session entitled *Culturally-Rooted Forms of Urban Renewal in Europe, Middle East and Asia (from antiquity to the present)* chaired by Nicholas Temple.

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what it cannot accommodate by denying it a form, spatial or otherwise. It is this grammar that commodity capitalism undermines. Cf. also, Paolo Virno, 'Three Remarks Regarding the Multitude's Subjectivity and Its Aesthetic Component', in *Under Pressure: Pictures, Subjects, and the New Spirit of Capitalism*, ed. by Daniel Birnbaum and Isabelle Graw (Frankfurt: Sternberg Press, 2008). A truly ungrammared multitude would be a field of zombies.

<sup>26</sup> In *The Three Ecologies* (1989/2000), Guattari, argues that there are three ecologies, the natural, the social, and the psychical and we cannot resolve one without resolving the other two. His reading of *Civilisation...*, that it is threatened by the narcissism of individuals. One of his most important contributions to psychoanalytic thought is to link the psyche to ecological consciousness. Ecosophy recognises the 'entire mental ecology' that is 'in crisis' and includes 'incorporeal species', like ideas and human discourses and practices.

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## Image Captions

- 1 The discourse on the city as a collective artifact. The texts by Geddes, Mumford, and Rossi. Images and quotes arranged by Lorens Holm.
  - 2 The plan is the signifier of social relations in the discourse on the city.
- The Agora of Athens** at the time of Aristotle (4th Century BC). Aristotle's paradigm *polis* or city state: the locus of commerce, public debate, and political leadership. For post Aristotelian political thinkers, this Athens is the signifier of participatory democracy and the paradigmatic form of public life.



The **Plan of Sforzinda** published in Filarete, *Trattato di Architettura* (ca 1465). An ideal city plan in which the compelling nature of its geometric organisation is made to coincide with immanence of meaning and state power.

**Venturi's montage**, in which the signifier of commodity form (the Las Vegas strip) replaces the signifier of collective life (Nolli's reading of Rome as a continuous inside-outside public space). The plans of Rome and NYC are reproduced at approximately the same scale.

**Early 20th C plan of Manhattan**: a grid structure parcelling farmland and forest into commodities within which 1) Habitation runs east-west; and 2) Commerce runs north-south. For Koolhaas, this grid, which is the collective space of Manhattan, is the signifier of capitalist logic harbouring capitalist fantasy. Images arranged by Lorens Holm.

**3 Post-Industrial Urban – Analogical Ravenscraig**. A close reading of the post-industrial site at Ravenscraig in which a montage of fragments of Nolli's Rome, Ledoux's Saltworks and Ungers' Archipelago City condense into an archipelago of city islands – analogical figures held together by the traces of the industrial infrastructure. Each island reproduces a part city and the social institutional forms associated with it. This project addresses the institutional nature of the city: the city appears as an archipelago of monumental institutions. Fergus Low, Robbie Miller, Elspeth Tayler, Session 2015–16. Images arranged by Cameron McEwan.

**4 Post-Industrial Urban – Ravenscraig: Heterogeneous Mat**. A close-reading of the post-industrial site at Ravenscraig involving a montage of Manhattan block fabric to produce a dense heterogeneous matt within which are embedded a series of Piranesian objects. These objects are found and transformed. When the Ravenscraig team placed the Manhattan grid into a post-industrial field, they are not simply putting buildings where there once had been steel sheds, filling an empty (and no doubt toxic) field with housing. They have replaced a field organized by relics signifying an industrial past with a particular form of Vitruvian concourse. This concourse has a particular 'Manhattan' distribution. In Manhattan, this distribution of social form is defined by orientation, scale, and thresholds. Manhattan becomes the basis for a grid of commercial avenues (north-south, 12 story) and residential streets (east-west, 8 story). The threshold is defined by a change in scale and a turn of the corner. There is a further level of articulation in the development of the building fabric, that relates building lobby types, including size of doors, presence or absence of vestibules and canopies, etc. – which mediate between street and apartment – to socio-economic classes. By putting the industrial relics in relation to contemporary housing, the team generated a post-industrial urban condition. Caitlin Bowers, Kieran McAdam, Fennella Nkansah, Danielle Reid, Session 2016–17. Images arranged by Cameron McEwan.

**5 City Edge – Newbridge: Linear Slabs and Frames**. Long slabs within a landscape of monumental infrastructural typologies organise the horizontality of this city edge site. The project responds to the forms, patterns, and transitional nature of the city periphery landscape defined by the green belt. By applying a compositional approach derived from the planar spatial relationships found in, e.g., Constructivist art and Miesian composition, the sprawling landscape of light industry, distribution, agriculture, and suburban housing is condensed and stitched together, so that high density social housing puts its inhabitants within an immediate and shocking relation to the landscape. The fluxy (sic) language of the linear slabs frame and contain space. While acknowledging that the existing city edge is a landscape of movement, the project provides an opportunity for pause. Matthew Gadie, Kirsten Pont, Athina Ralli, Li Zhen Ng, Session 2016–17. Images arranged by Cameron McEwan.